

# FIRST 5 SHASTA

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## **The Maternal Depression Journey – Healthy Pathways for Parent and Child**

Having a baby is a life altering journey for all mothers, whether it is her first child or her sixth child. Amidst the excitement of a new baby, unexpected and confusing feelings of unhappiness may be lurking for many mothers. With the addition of a new member to the family, change is inevitable; with change often comes stress. There is also a change in a woman's body chemistry when pregnancy hormones are no longer needed. These changes can result in a variety of symptoms identified with maternal depression.

Maternal depression (also called post-natal depression or the “baby blues”) can be a serious condition since the mother's emotional health is critical to the healthy early development of her new baby.

Mothers are most frequently their baby's primary caregiver and their contribution to an infant's development is enormous. A baby's physical health and brain development actually depend on a nurturing, dependable relationship with its mother. Although 25% of a baby's brain is in place at birth, they are born with about 100 billion brain cells yet to be connected. Early interactions and experiences, including holding, feeding and comforting, inspire dramatic development in the brain, with connections or “synapses” being formed at up to 2 million per second! When mom is suffering emotionally, the delicate bonds between mother and infant that are so important to healthy development may be compromised.

The good news is there is help for families struggling with maternal depression. Research tells us that treating maternal depression with therapeutic services that involve the parent and child is highly effective. Both clinical therapeutic services offering professional counseling and non-clinical services that offer mothers a knowledgeable and caring person to talk to can inspire healing.

The Redding-based *Healthy Pathways for Infants* program is one opportunity for families to receive clinical therapeutic services. Upon receiving an almost \$900,000 grant from the Shasta Children and Families First Commission, this Northern Valley Catholic Social Service program was able to broaden its outreach and now offers services to any Shasta County family with a child, or children, in the 0-to-3 age range. Income level is not a factor – counseling is always free! Services are provided by Susan Howland Thompson, a licensed clinical social worker specializing in infant mental health, and a staff of four. Susan often quotes D.W. Winnicott, saying “there is no such thing as a baby.” Susan adds, “there is a family, a community...so you *never* work with a baby alone!”

Although Healthy Pathways is the only clinical program of its kind in the north state, there are a variety of programs and services for families offered on a local level in every county. Butte County families will benefit from the inter-disciplinary team of clinicians who are receiving intensive training in maternal/infant mental health due to funding allocated by the Butte County Children and Families Commission. Wherever they are located, parents might

discuss their needs with their doctor, who can be a great resource and advocate for his/her patient.

Acknowledging feelings of sadness instead of joy and identifying the symptoms of maternal depression can be difficult for a new mother. Some expectant parents may feel overwhelmed and anxious before their baby has even arrived. After arrival, taking care of a baby can prove more challenging than mom and dad could ever have imagined. How does a woman or her loved ones know if she is suffering from maternal depression? Begin by checking the following list of symptoms.

### **Symptoms of Maternal Depression**

- Pervasive sadness, most of the time every day
- Sleeping too much / sleeping too little
- Appetite: eating too much / eating too little
- Unexpected weight gain / weight loss
- Difficulty remembering things
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling guilty – A LOT
- Thoughts of hurting yourself or your baby

If you are a new mother and have experienced any of these symptoms for more than a week, you may want to take steps that will help you start feeling better. Parents of young children are encouraged to make use of services in their area – and embark on an incredible journey to an enduring, healthy relationship between parent and child.

Shasta County parents can request help for maternal depression or other mental health issues by calling Healthy Pathways for Infants at 1-800-846-1451 or 530-241-8111.

*The Shasta Children and Families First Commission, the Prop 10 Commission, was established after California voters passed Proposition 10 in 1998, adding a 50 cent-per-pack tax on cigarettes to fund education, health, child care and other programs to promote early childhood development for expectant parents and children up to age five. The Shasta Commission receives approximately \$1.8 million annually in Prop 10 revenues.*